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McRaven: Success in Human Domain Fundamental to Special Ops

By Claudette Roulo
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, June 5, 2013 – While there's no shortage of doctrine on how the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps provide value to the nation, special operations forces aren't restricted to any of the traditional doctrines, the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command said here today.

The three great military theorists of the past 200 years -- Carl von Clausewitz, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Giulio Douhet -- made powerful arguments for the land, sea and air domains of warfare, Navy Adm. William H. McRaven told the audience at an Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis-Tufts University Fletcher School conference.

"But where does SOF fit into all of this?" he asked.

While special operations forces are comfortable in the realms of traditional warfare, the human domain is perhaps more important -- both to the troops and to policy makers, McRaven said.

The human domain encompasses the totality of the physical, cultural, and social environments that influence human behavior, he explained. Success in this domain won't be achieved by traditional ground, naval or air forces, he added.

"Instead, success in the human domain will depend upon understanding the human terrain and establishing trust with those humans who occupy that space," the admiral said. Building understanding and trust takes time, but once it's built, "we can apply unique capabilities that are designed to assess, analyze, operate and prevail in population-centric strategies or struggles," he said.

While operating in the human domain is not the sole purview of special operations forces, it is one of their core competencies, McRaven said. "It is where our language training, our cultural skills and small footprint all lend themselves to developing the military-to-military trust necessary for success," he explained.

Any discussion of the global special operations forces network is incomplete without including the human domain, the admiral added.

When that network is laid on top of the human domain, its full potential begins to be revealed, McRaven said. This potential, he added, is what he was trying to capture when he developed the Special Operations Command 2020 vision.

Borrowing ideas from Defense Department experts on network-centric operations, the concept is more about networking than the network, McRaven said. "We cannot simply apply new technologies to the current doctrine, platforms and organizations. Organizations, doctrine and technology must co-evolve," the admiral said.

"The power of the network is derived from linking knowledgeable entities that are geographically dispersed," he said. Today, Socom has more than 11,000 men and women operating in more than 80 countries around the world, he noted.

Done right, networking enables special operations forces to share information, to collaborate with partners, to develop shared awareness and to achieve a degree of self-synchronization, McRaven said.

Self-synchronization is an understanding of what the other person in the node brings and how to tap into that, McRaven explained. The idea complements the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's mission command philosophy for the joint force, he added.

Networking has enormous potential for improving speed of command and force responsiveness, the admiral said, but most importantly, it will improve the understanding of the human domain. This, he said, will improve special operations' ability to illuminate problems and help policy makers understand the threats and opportunities that are out there.

Building understanding of the human domain requires boots on the ground, feeding information into the network, McRaven said.

"Every single person on the ground is important," he said. "Metcalfe's Law, which was developed to understand hard-wired communications systems, states that as the number of nodes in a network increases linearly, the potential value, or effectiveness of the network, increases exponentially."

Humans are more important than hardware, and "while the law may not be directly suitable to the human network, experience tells me that every additional node in the human network does, in fact,

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add an exponential understanding of the problem area," McRaven said.

The admiral noted that this exponential increase is achieved with the signature small footprint of special operations forces. "So, it's not about a large footprint, it's about what SOF brings in 80-plus countries around the world, sometimes with only a couple of operators at remote locations, working face-to-face with our partners," he said.

"This is how the network becomes connected, and this is how we can create an operating picture that can effectively inform the Pentagon and the geographic combatant commanders," McRaven added.

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